

Looking for Extra Forage

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Whenever there is a change in your livestock marketings resulting in increased inventories there will be the need for increased feed supplies. Maximizing the use of pasture can make a significant contribution to increasing on-farm feed supplies. Here are several different approaches that a producer might take to make the most of on-farm resources.

Rotational grazing will give increased production. Doing this from the beginning of the season will give the most benefit but even in mid season you will realize improved grass production. The value in rotational grazing comes from the rest period or non-grazing period that allows the grass to re-grow. A re-growth period of approximately 30-40 days should be the goal. Rotational grazing will also help reduce losses due to tramping and encourage the animals to consume all the grass rather than being selective in what they eat.

Nitrogen (N) fertilizer will give a boost to grass production in a pasture. Apply preceding a rainfall in order to get the nitrogen into the soil. If the nitrogen granules lay on the soil surface without rain, much of the N will be lost into the atmosphere. An application of 50 to 75 kgs. of N/ha is best; lower amounts will not promote significant growth; the grass will turn green but extra growth will be limited. For nitrogen recommendations for pasture see the Agronomy Guide for Field Crops (OMAF Publication 811).

Stockpile grazing can extend the grazing season into the late fall or even early winter. Stockpile grazing involves allowing the forage to grow through the late summer and early fall for use as pasture after the growing season ends. Research and experience has shown that a non-lactating beef cow can survive very well on stockpiled forage and even gain weight. This practice can reduce the need for stored forage for several weeks to several months depending on how you apply it to your farm. See the Stockpiling Perennial Forages for Fall & Winter Grazing Factsheet (Order #99-009).

Look for alternate grazing areas, on your farm and in your community. Second and third growth in hay fields can be grazed if the hay is not needed. Select fields that have been down for a few years as your first choice. In some parts of the province there are fields that have not been cropped or pastured for a number of years; investigate the possibility of utilizing some of these for extra forage. There will be a cost for fencing, but that will need to be balanced against the value of the extra pasture that you will achieve. Temporary electric fence can be easily erected to make use of an area that has not traditionally been pastured.

Consider harvesting cereal crops as forage rather than grain. These crops make excellent forage and greatly increase the amount of feed that is realized from the crop. Cereals are most successfully harvested as baleage or silage at or before the kernel reaches the soft dough stage and while the leaves are still green.

Early harvested cereal fields can be re-seeded to a cereal to provide forage in about 6 weeks time (seeding should be done by mid August and requires sufficient soil moisture to germinate and grow the new plants.) Oats work well for this but barley will also produce good late season forage. Broadcast the seed and work lightly to get good seed-to-soil contact.

Stubble turnips are another alternative for early August seeding into a hay or cereal stubble. Stubble turnips will produce excellent quality grazing for the fall period. Livestock will graze both the tops and the tubers of the turnips.

There are a number of ways to add to or stretch your forage supply for the coming year so that the need to sell animals due to lack of feed can be avoided. Look at all the opportunities that are available to you and utilize the one that will best fit your operation.